



# The ABCs of Captions

1. **Accuracy.** Ensure every piece of information within the caption is accurate and complete. This also includes ensuring the captions are grammatically and stylistically accurate, adhering to the guidance contained in this guide. An accurate caption helps ensure an image is newsworthy, is of historical value, and can be more easily retrieved from databases.

2. **Brevity.** When writing a caption, be certain every word is necessary to tell the story of the image. Many captions must convey a great deal of information in a few short sentences, so they must be written concisely to maximize their effectiveness. Do not use 15 words where five will do.

3. **Clarity.** To be understood by the end user, a caption must be clear in both intent and expression. Select language to make certain the reader will understand what is happening in the image.

## The 5 W's.

When gathering information to include in a caption, keep in mind the 5 W's: who, what, when where and why. All elements must be present to accurately communicate the story of an image or video clip.

1. **Who.** Who or what is the subject of the image?

a. If the subject of a sentence is a person or persons, provide the rank, first and last name, title, and military unit for each person.

Organizational elements should be listed from smallest to largest

- U.S. Marines from Kilo Company, 3rd Battalion, 1st Marine Regiment, 1st Marine Division.
- People appearing in the background need not be identified unless they are essential to the story of the image.
- Do not include the names of minors or dependents of military members.
- Do not include the names of American citizens, to include service members, receiving medical treatment without the express written consent of the patient. Divulging medical information can violate the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPPA).

b. If the subject of the sentence is an object, provide the equipment name and model, name and ship hull number, or name and model of the aircraft or vehicle. Include both the name of the object as well as what kind of object it is. For example:

- An F/A-18C Hornet prepares to launch from the aircraft carrier USS Dwight D. Eisenhower (CVN 69).
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2. **What.** Describe the action captured in the image.

a. Use active voice when describing the action. When writing in active voice, the subject is doing something, while in passive voice, something is being done to the subject.



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- b. Do not over-describe the action; let the image speak as well.
- Builder 2nd Class John Reid, assigned to Naval Mobile Construction Battalion (NMCB) 7, helps refurbish a wooden cabinet as he removes a screw with a cordless power drill Sept. 22, 2015 at the Nazareth Boys Orphanage in Victoria, Seychelles.
  - U.S. Navy Builder 2nd Class John Reid, assigned to Naval Mobile Construction Battalion (NMCB) 7, refurbishes a cabinet Sept. 22, 2015 at the Nazareth Boys Orphanage in Victoria, Seychelles.
3. **When.** Provide the date the image was taken.
- Include the date in the dateline and within the caption.
  - Do not include "on" before the date.
  - Days of the week need not be included.
  - Spell out March, April, May, June, July.
  - Abbreviate Aug., Sept., Oct., Nov., Dec., Jan., Feb.
  - Spell out the month when writing month and year with no day:
    - Feb. 27, 2007, but February 2007
4. **Where.** Provide the geographic location as well as the name of the city, country, base, facility, or organization if applicable
- If there is no city, give a region or general area
    - off the coast of Southern California
  - If the image was captured on a ship, provide the ship name as well as where it is moored or underway
  - If it is an undisclosed location, state that within the caption
  - Abbreviate state names in the dateline and in the body of the caption.
  - Spell out state names when they stand alone within the caption.
  - Use abbreviations when paired with a city or base/installation.
  - Do not use postal codes.
  - The following states are never abbreviated:  
Alaska, Hawaii, Idaho, Iowa, Maine, Ohio, Texas, Utah.
  - The following is the AP style state abbreviations:
- |        |      |       |      |       |       |
|--------|------|-------|------|-------|-------|
| Ala.   | Fla. | Md.   | Neb. | N.D.  | Tenn. |
| Ariz.  | Ga.  | Mass. | Nev. | Okla. | Vt.   |
| Ark.   | Ill. | Mich. | N.H. | Ore.  | Va.   |
| Calif. | Ind. | Minn. | N.J. | Pa.   | Wash. |
| Colo.  | Kan. | Miss. | N.M. | R.I.  | W.Va. |
| Conn.  | Ky.  | Mo.   | N.Y. | S.C.  | Wis.  |
| Del.   | La.  | Mont. | N.C. | S.D.  | Wyo.  |
5. **Why.** In the second sentence explain the purpose of the event, exercise or operation depicted in the image.



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## Constructing a caption

1. The first sentence contains the 5 W's and is always written in the present tense using active voice.

- A caption describes the moment the image is captured, not what came before or after
- Do not include people or objects not in the photograph.

2. The second sentence, sometimes referred to as a “tag line,” provides background information about the image. It explains why the image is significant and places it in a larger context.

- ARABIAN GULF (Sept. 21, 2015) Air Traffic Controllers 2nd Class Paul Hewson and David Evans discuss control techniques on Case Three flight operations from the carrier air traffic control center aboard the aircraft carrier USS Theodore Roosevelt (CVN 71). **Theodore Roosevelt is deployed in the U.S. 5th Fleet area of operations supporting Operation Inherent Resolve, strike operations in Iraq and Syria, as directed, maritime security operations and theater security cooperation efforts in the region.** (U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist 3rd Class Patricia Reichardt/Released)

3. The byline contains the photographer's rate/rank, name and the release status of the image.

4. When writing a caption, remember that the audience for Navy imagery is global. Write sentences that will be understood by a nonmilitary user.

- Abbreviations and Acronyms
  - Define all acronyms upon first use within the caption. Spell out the term, then place the acronym in parentheses. Use the acronym on second reference.
  - A few universally recognized abbreviations are required in some circumstances. Some others are acceptable depending on the context. But in general, avoid alphabet soup. Do not use abbreviations or acronyms that the reader would not quickly recognize.
  - Terms not commonly before the public should not be reduced to acronyms solely to save a few words.
  - Do not use acronyms for terms used only once within the caption.
  - Do not use apostrophes when using a plural acronym.
    - MREs, not MRE's, F/A-18s, not F/A-18's.



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- Avoid jargon. Explain terms and practices that are not commonly known outside of military circles. For example, do not use shorthand references to military units unless they have been previously defined within the caption.
5. Do not editorialize. Stick to the facts as presented by the image and gathered at the scene.
6. Identifying people in an image.
- When identifying people appearing in an image:
    - Provide the full name and rank and/or title of every person when there are four or fewer people in the image. It is not necessary to individually identify large groups, although there may be some cases (such as with high-level officials) where that would be appropriate.
  - Indicate position in a caption from left to right using commas, not parentheses.
    - Mass Communication Specialists 3<sup>rd</sup> Class Ted Shackleford, left, and Roy Hinkley Jr. participate in a training exercise.
    - From left, Engineman 3<sup>rd</sup> Class Ken Carson and Quartermaster Barbara Roberts, Lt. Jonas Grumby and Aviation Boatswain's Mate (Fuels) 2<sup>nd</sup> Class Jeff Albertson participate in a training exercise.
7. Do not include quotes in a caption.